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SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN GREGORY MEEKS VISIT TO CARTAGENA AND TUMACO
HIGHLIGHTS AFRO-COLOMBIAN SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT ISSUES
MAY 28-31, 2009

Summary

¶11. (SBU) Congressman Gregory Meeks visited Cartagena and Tumaco from May 28-31. In Cartagena, his attendance at the Afro-Colombian Commission's presentation of recommendations to Colombian Vice President Santos sent a strong signal of U.S. support for the legitimate aspirations of Afro-Colombians. In addition to attending the meeting, Congressman Meeks met with the mayor and traveled to the Islas del Rosario (a small island chain off of Cartagena's Caribbean coast) to visit a USAID socio-economic program targeting Afro-Colombians. The Tumaco portion of Mr. Meeks's visit focused on the complicated relationship between security and economic growth. Tumaco, the second largest city in the department of Nario on the southwest Pacific Coast, is currently the most violent municipality in the country, with more than five murders occurring each day within the city. It is a priority region for the Embassy's Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI). End Summary.

AFRO-COLOMBIAN COMMISSION PRESENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

¶12. (U) For the past year and a half, the Commission has met with over 4,000 representatives from Afro-Colombian communities throughout the country. The Commission presented its findings to Vice President Francisco Santos at a ceremony at the historic Palace of the Inquisition on May 29. During the event Cartagena Mayor Judith Pinedo, Minister of the Interior Fabio Valencia Cossio, Colombian congresswoman Maria Isabel Urrutia, and Minister of Culture Paula Moreno also spoke. The speakers all pointed to the problem of structural discrimination against Afro-Colombians within politics and society. They also recognized the positive steps taken toward inclusivity, pointing to Law 70, but stressed the need for increased representation of Afros in political parties and the armed forces. Minister Valencia praised the naming of Ms. Moreno to the cabinet, and the professional success of Police General Luis Alberto Moore, both Afro-Colombians, as more than just symbolic tokens of diversity.

¶13. (U) Of the proposed recommendations, Vice President Santos highlighted the importance of creating incentives for greater Afro-Colombian political participation and to raise the numbers of Afro-Colombians in institutions of higher education. He underlined his commitment to further inclusiveness within Colombian society and his intent to enforce laws already in place to encourage diversity. Specifically, he wants to make Afro-Colombian history a mandatory subject in Colombian schools.

¶14. (SBU) Also present were several members of the Afro-Colombian congressional bancada, or caucus. Five of the eight members are currently under criminal investigation, some for ties to human

rights violators, others for simple corruption.

¶5. (U) Finally, the Commission committed to presenting a law designed to increase inclusion of Afro-Colombian, Palenquero, and Raizal communities to congress on July 20th.

¶6. (U) The Commission's principal findings vis-`-vis the causes of Afro-Colombian disadvantages were:

-- Low participation and representation in political and institutional decision-making processes.

-- Restricted access to quality basic and higher education, which limits quality employment opportunities and perpetuates poverty.

-- Unequal access to the labor market; employment focused on low-wage, low-specialization jobs.

-- Racism and racial discrimination.

-- Unequal access to social and economic development opportunities.

-- Low self-recognition and recognition of the value of ethnic and cultural diversity.

-- Low availability of information for the Afro-Colombian population, hindering development of adequate public policies adjusted to ethnic and territorial differences.

¶7. (U) The Commission's principal recommendations were:

-- Increase political representation by providing stimuli to political parties which favor the election of Afro-Colombian candidates.

-- Increase access and create incentives for public and private institutions. Focus on inter-cultural education. Develop quota system for scholarships for higher education. Strengthen schools in Afro-Colombian municipalities. Create a national award for inclusion of ethnic diversity.

-- Seek participation of Afro-Colombians in labor market that, at least, matches the percentage of Afro-Colombians in the country. Incorporate minority-owned businesses in government procurement systems.

-- Support legislative projects to penalize racism.

-- Foster entrepreneurship amongst Afro-Colombian population. Create tax incentives for private-sector companies who develop diversity policies. Create social responsibility certification for companies that develop diversity policies. Include Afro-Colombians in companies that have agreements to conduct business in Afro-Colombian territories.

-- Special mention of inclusion of Afro-Colombians to the Armed Forces.

-- Develop ethnic diversity promotion campaign. Re-write Afro-Colombian history. Create centers that promote Afro-Colombian cultural memory.

-- Differentiated approach in governmental information system. Government information systems should be more inclusive of ethnic groups.

U.S. ASSISTANCE TO LAS ISLAS DEL ROSARIO

¶8. (SBU) While in Cartagena, Congressman Meeks, accompanied by the Deputy Chief of Mission and USAID Mission Director, visited Isla Grande, one of the islands that make up the Islas del Rosario, where USAID, through the Pan American Development Foundation, recently concluded a USD 240,000 activity. The activity provided support for internally displaced and other vulnerable populations through income generation, institutional strengthening, health, education, and environmental initiatives in the Islas del Rosario and other

municipalities in Bolivar and Sucre. During his visit, Congressman Meeks spoke to several dozen of the 700 inhabitants who make up the local community council and who have benefitted from the strengthening of their small businesses, including local craft production and an eco-guide organization. Several small eco-hotels have been developed and the installation of dry toilets and solar panels has improved living conditions. The community is grateful for the assistance they have received and they expressed their commitment to environmentally sustainable practices as they move ahead.

U.S. ASSISTANCE TO TUMACO, NARIO

¶9. (U) On May 30 Congressman Meeks, accompanied by DCM and Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) Deputy Director, travelled to Tumaco, a predominantly Afro-Colombian municipality in Nario, to observe the security, economic, and development challenges facing this area. The problems in Tumaco are similar to other rural Colombia areas. Tumaco's residents suffer from economic dislocations caused by coca cultivation, transport, and trade. For example, this port city is not able to take advantage of its Pacific location and capitalize on its seafood market potential. In addition to these daily occurrences, in February 2008 the city flooded, affecting over 30,000 people and an estimated 20,000 hectares of productive agriculture, much of it African palm. The USG provided over USD 300,000 in flood assistance to the affected communities. However, the flood still bears economic effects today.

¶10. (SBU) Tumaco shares a lengthy, lawless, and porous border with Ecuador. Police and security forces scarcely penetrate outside of the urban core of the municipality due to limited resources. As a result, over 15,000 hectares of coca are grown in Tumaco annually, and this illegal activity is closely intertwined with the exploitation of Afro-Colombian inhabitants. The Embassy continues to work on improving the security situation, decreasing illicit crop cultivation, and implementing alternative development programs. We

understand that this situation will only improve if we take a holistic approach and attack the problem from all angles.

¶11. (SBU) Congressman Meeks was also briefed on the Colombian military's operations in the region. He learned that drug labs are commonly built around the border, and that most of the arms and chemicals used in processing drugs are illegally transported from Ecuador. He then helICOptered from Tumaco to Llorente, a small town to the southeast, to see the affects of a limited police presence and drug producing economy. He met with the Commander of the Llorente police station, who explained that since the station was built five years ago, it has regularly received threats and been attacked. The Commander then explained drug production in the town. A year ago, a truck carrying chemicals used to produce cocaine was confiscated, but still sits in front of the police station. The police are not allowed to move the truck until the case has gone to trial, which can take an unspecified amount of time. However, due to several attempts to steal the truck, the police have had to expend resources and guard the truck 24 hours per day. The locals' perception of this police presence is mixed - some people are happy that the GOC is attempting to bring stability, but those involved in illicit activities are obviously not.

¶12. (SBU) The NAS officers explained to the CODEL that they are comprehensively strengthening the ability of Colombian police forces to assert security in Tumaco and drive out illicit actors:

-- NAS supports training for police officers, improving police stations, and providing basic equipment to improve their ability to enforce the law.

-- The Embassy continues to support a comprehensive aerial eradication program that seeks to eliminate the financial viability of growing illegal crops, therefore reducing incentives for illegal actors to remain in Tumaco. The Embassy also supports GOC efforts to manually eradicate illegal crops.

-- Through the Pacific Coast Initiative, the USG will spend USD 10

million on the Pacific Coast to enhance the ability of the GOC to capture illegal traffickers and crack down on violent actors who use the seas to transit drugs up and down the coast.

¶13. (SBU) The Embassy seeks to improve the chances for the community to enter a licit economy that provides far wider opportunities for themselves, their children, and their grandchildren through the development angle to complement the security angle. Congressman Meeks visited several USAID supported programs, including a traveling family health clinic called Profamilia. Since 2000, USAID's funds have been used to expand Profamilia's work into some of Colombia's most remote and conflict-riddled regions. USAID's current program with Profamilia is valued at USD 9.8 million and is active in 169 Colombian municipalities. The clinic provides information on STDs and contraceptives to young people, and basic health care provisions to mothers and children. Congressman Meeks also met with two women's shellfish harvesting associations supported by USAID ADAM and MIDAS Alternative Development programs to gain their perspective on economic opportunities in the area. Several hundred families belong to the two associations. USAID assistance aims to strengthen the organizations and improve access to markets, helping harvesters better position themselves and receive better pricing for their product. Their concerns echoed the concerns of Afro-Colombians in other meetings this trip: unemployment, poor living conditions, and insecurity.

FUTURE PROMISE

¶14. (SBU) CSDI coordination in Tumaco has begun, and programming strategies are being drafted. However, Congressman Meeks was able to see the violent reality of Tumaco and the hopeful contours of a policy which should pay dramatic dividends as implementation begins.

Congressman Meeks' trip highlighted the fact that the challenges facing both the Afro-Colombian communities, poor communities such as Tumaco, and Colombia itself, are best addressed by a comprehensive security plus development approach that provides people both the security tools to make their own decisions without coercion, as well as the tools to turn these choices into reality through economic development.

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